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New Man at the U.N.: Global Trouble-Shooter and Skilled Linguist

Global Trouble-Shooter

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UNITED NATIONS, N.Y., Feb. 8 — In "Silent Missions," his memoir, Gen. Vernon A. Walters relates a conversation he had at a reception in 1964 with the Soviet Ambassador to Brazil.

Man in the News

The Ambassador complained to General Walters, then the United States military attaché in Brazil, that Americans always wanted to speak English. Even when they try to learn a foreign tongue, he continued, they suffer because they do not have the Slavs' ear for languages.

General Walters, a gifted linguist, bluntly switched to Russian, asking him if he would like to speak Portuguese instead. The Ambassador, insulted, replied, "Walters, you may be good soldier, but diplomat you are not."

Interpreter to Presidents

Now Vernon Anthony Walters, 68 years old, the 6-foot-3-inch former soldier and Ambassador at Large, will have the opportunity to prove his diplomatic skills as successor to Jeane J. Kirkpatrick as chief American delegate to the United Nations.

The highly visible, Cabinet-level job will mean a new challenge for the man who has made his reputation as a global trouble-shooter who does not call attention to himself. General Walters speaks seven foreign languages, five of them fluently, and has served part-time as interpreter to five Presidents.

Of his outspoken predecessor, the general said in a recent telephone interview: "She's done a terrific job of restoring the position of the United States in the U.N. Everyone has a different style, but it's the same President and basically the same policy."

Supporters of General Walters say they are confident he will bring both candor and loyalty to the United Nations job.

"He's been everywhere in the world, speaks all the languages and can debate very effectively," said William E. Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence. "When he worked for me, he was fearless in expressing his views and totally loyal once a decision was made. I used him as a total alter ego."

But critics assert that although he has been effective when acting under instructions, he has never been called upon to craft policy or make major policy judgments.

A practicing Roman Catholic and fervent anti-Communist, he is also an unabashed American flag-waver who has called the Vietnam War "one of the noblest and most unselfish wars" in American history. He says his world view is determined by what he calls his "certain idea about the United States — that it is the last best hope for mankind."

Human rights advocates, like Lawrence Birns of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a private study group, have criticized what they characterize as his lack of concern for human rights abuses and his long history of warm relations with extreme right-wing military governments, such as the Pinochet Government in Chile and Argentina's former military junta.

Some rights advocates say they recall his response to a reporter's question in 1981 on Guatemala's poor human rights record. He said: "There are some problems that are never resolved. One has to define a solution that respects a being's right to live without fear. But as I see it, the best way to do that is not to impose the ideas of one nation on top of another."

Born in New York on Jan. 3, 1917, the youngest of three children, he attended French and English Catholic schools but dropped out at the age of 16 to work in his British-born father's insurance company.

He enlisted in the Army in 1941 and is fond of telling friends: "Adolf Hitler did at least one good deed in his life. He got me out of my father's insurance company — with my father's blessing."

Within a year he was a second lieutenant. As a bright aide who used his linguistic abilities to befriend foreign generals and diplomats, he rose rapidly through the ranks. In World War II, he was assigned to be a liaison officer with the Brazilian forces fighting in the United States Fifth Army in Italy under Gen. Mark Clark. His language abilities brought him to General Clark's attention, and ultimately to the attention of Gen. Alfred M. Gunther, the Fifth Army's chief of staff. He was aide-de-camp to General Clark during the liberation of Rome.

From military attaché in Rio de Janeiro and Paris, he rose to become a senior officer of the Defense Intelligence Agency. After 35 years in the service, he retired as a three-star general.

Although he may not have made history himself, he has certainly seen it firsthand. He served as W. Averell Harriman's aide in the early years of the cold war, accompanied President Truman on his historic meeting with a defiant Gen. Douglas MacArthur and shuttled with President Eisenhower to a series of summit meetings from Geneva to White Sulphur Springs, W. Va.

As translator for Vice President Nixon during his good-will tour of Latin America in 1958, General Walters was cut in the mouth by broken glass when a mob stoned their car in Caracas.

Later, as military attaché in Paris, General Walters is remembered for smuggling Henry A. Kissinger in and out of France for clandestine meetings with Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam.

"He was great as our James Bond, getting us in and out secretly, even giving us code names," said Winston Lord, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, who accompanied Mr. Kissinger to the secret talks with the Vietnamese.

Just weeks after becoming deputy director of the C.I.A. under President Nixon, General Walters carried out instructions from the White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, to warn the F.B.I. that the Watergate investigation could compromise intelligence operations in Mexico. "It simply did not occur to me that the chief of staff to the President might be asking me to do someting that was illegal or wrong," he wrote in his memoirs.

He sat out the Carter years, becoming a private consultant, including among his clients an American company interested in selling arms to Morocco. He gave up the lucrative work when President Reagan offered him the job of roving Ambassador in 1981.

Since then, General Walters has visited 100 countries and logged an average of 10,000 miles a week as the Reagan Administration's chief trouble-shooter.

A lifelong bachelor who does not smoke, drinks little and has an acknowledged weakness for good chocolates, General Walters combines straight talk with a raconteur's charm. "I've always felt I could get more done with no publicity," he said in the interview.

"This is further than I ever expected to get," General Walters said of his new job. "Maybe I'm not so much of an amateur as the Soviet Ambassador thought I was."